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ABSTRACT

The ethnic minority local church and its role in the Methodist ministry is discussed in an effort to emphasize the importance of strengthening Methodist ties with the black community. The black religious heritage and its historical relationship to the Methodist church are also discussed. It is suggested that church boards and agencies should institute policies that focus on the development of ethnic minority churches and the black ministry. A wide range of research including case studies, action research, participant observation, attitudinal research, and personal interviews is recommended to help the Methodist church develop a stronger black ministry. It is also suggested that the ministry attempt to develop contacts with the traditionally black colleges and all black seminarians and preministerial students. The intentional development of the black Methodist ministry is suggested as an important topic that should be included on the agenda of the 1980 General Conference of the Methodist Church. (SF)

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No. 29, December 2, 1979

THE INTENTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLACK MINISTRY

by Bishop James S. Thomas

The headlines will be familiar to you: "The Crisis In The Ethnic Minority Church," "The Ethnic Minority Church: A Troublesome Presence," "The Black Church: A New Agenda?" and "The Crisis In Ethnic Church Leadership." All of these are actual headlines,¹ and all of them were written within the 1976-80 quadrennium. Three of the four, in fact, were published in the first quarter of the year 1979.

But if the headlines will raise any eyebrows among us, the commentary will be even more disturbing.

In an episcopal address, the Council of Bishops said:

Within fifteen years, the United Methodist Church could lose the opportunity to witness effectively to ethnic minorities. If we allow this to happen, the situation will be irreversible here as it has been in several prominent church bodies in the past. Obviously, the United Methodist Church is at a crucial point of decision in 1976. As limited as may be our present opportunities, they will not exist at all if present trends are allowed to run their course. Such a tragic default in witness need not occur.²

Three years later, Cornish Rogers, a black pastor at Claremont, California, and a contributing associate editor to The Christian Century, ended an article by saying: "If we do nothing about this problem, it will go away. The ethnic churches will wither on the vine. But ethnic people will relate themselves to more culturally indigenous denominations, and the United Methodist Church will lose its distinctive character by becoming just another white tribal sect."³

And Bishop Edward L. Tullis, whose effective leadership--of ethnic minority churches as an integral part of the whole--is nationally known, further underscored the urgency of our title by saying: "Given the present mood of the UMC, in general, within a few years all of our local ethnic churches are just going away."⁴

Then, he elaborated: "...the general mood of the church has not generally been intentional in the direction of strengthening the ethnic minority local church."⁵

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Now these headlines and this commentary have been repeated in many other places and in as many different forms. The urgency of doing something intentional about the ethnic minority church has now become both an agony and an opportunity. We are neither as good as we often think we are nor as bad as our critics make us out to be, but the urgency remains.

In many of the annual conferences of the United Methodist Church, there are vital programs aimed at the development of the ethnic minority local church. Some are well funded, most are well meaning, and all are founded on the astounding faith that something can be done to redeem local churches whose social and economic plight can be traced all the way back to slavery.

I would be among those to applaud those efforts and programs. If they could all be brought together in one report, and if all the dramatic stories could be told, they would surprise most of us; and we are probably used to being surprised. But no one has brought all of these programs together. And so, in seventy-three different ways, and in as many annual conferences, we range all the way from the token to the heroic on such enormous problems as would defy description. It is clear now that no dramatic success can be recorded unless and until there is some diplomatic development of completely new agendas and a deliberate effort at radical cooperation of the most imaginative kind.

And what of our boards and agencies? Perhaps I ought to begin by saying that I am not among those who have declared open season on the boards and agencies of the church. It is becoming popular to do this in some quarters and it makes a great speech. But it must be remembered that boards and agencies are made up of ministers and lay persons who are elected by

general, jurisdictional, and annual conferences. It is the grass-roots church--much more than our critics will admit--who make the policies, hear the reports of the staff, and vote the budgets. If, in a place or two, the staff has an inordinate amount of power, it may be as much by default of the elected board as by intentional perversity. But be that as it may, it is, I think, gloriously beside the point.

The point is that the general boards and agencies must also share some responsibility in our failure to draft and to execute transforming programs of development for the ethnic minority local church. Locked into our inadequate budgets and besieged by a thousand maintenance duties, the boards have ample reason to wait on the General Conference to authorize something dramatic. But I want to propose--bluntly, if need be--that no General Conference in memory has succeeded where its component annual conferences have failed. And no general board of the church can afford the luxury of waiting for a quadrennial trumpet blast before it becomes intentional about what it perceives to be crucial to the life and future of the United Methodist Church.

To be more pointed, I welcome this opportunity to say to the Board of Higher Education and Ministry that its charter and function lie close to the heart of the development of any local church. Ministry--that is the word. Full of theological substance, it will mean little unless and until it is translated into new recruits--both lay and ordained--who have a glorious vision and an undiscourageable faith. Upon this board--more than upon any other, in my judgment--should fall the responsibility of intentionally developing the black ministry (among others, of course); and it is the burden of this lecture to propose ways in which this might be done.

Speaking specifically about the black ministry, an urgent word needs to be said about religious heritage. That the black religious heritage is a rich one is a truth which, by now, ought to be calmly admitted as a fact of history. Since the beginning of the civil rights revolution, a spate of books has appeared reminding us of the rich heritage that blacks share and which they have contributed to the mainstream of American religious life.

Indeed, so rich is the heritage of black religion that even without the benefit of intentional planning, a rough and thoroughly secular prize-fighter, George Foreman, could forsake a lucrative career in the ring to witness as a born-again Christian and a minister of sorts. A premier dancer, Ben Vereen, could and did confess that he was drawn toward the ministry in his boyhood and even now considers his career on the stage as a sort of ministry. And what of James Baldwin, Marian Anderson, Mahalia Jackson, and Leontyne Price?

The black church has indeed been the spawning place for all kinds of strong individual careers in education, the arts, the professions, and politics. But now, at the risk of receiving strong criticism, I am bluntly proposing that we need to turn to another agenda. I yield to no one in my participation in and gratitude for the black religious heritage and I will strongly contend for its authentic survival. But when a matter has been put on the agenda a hundred times, it does not need to be put on there a hundred more times. Thank God for the fervor of my foreparents; would that we had more of it--but self-congratulation in another and very different social setting is a matter of quite a different order. In fact, I agree with Bishop John Hurst Adams, of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, when he says that most black churches are still operating on the agenda given to them by our foreparents. And there is no better way to self-destruction than that.

Saying only this much about a theme that would, if properly treated require a volume, let me now go on to propose the first and--in my judgment--most neglected item on the agenda for the black church. It is that calm and sober appraisal of the black church, qua black church, that most of us--black and white alike--refused to take in earlier decades. We now have--belatedly--a sizable shelf of books on the nature of black religion. What we do not have is a careful appraisal of black churches--as the social institutions that they are--in full context and in depth. There must be a good reason why the entire range of black churches has not been researched in depth for forty-six years. To be sure, there have been limited studies--some of them within our own church--but there is no greater illusion, quite as alive among blacks as among whites, than that we already know the sociological nature of the black church. The plain, hard fact is that we don't.

If, then, the General Conference votes to emphasize the ethnic minority local church in the 1980-84 quadrennium, the first item on the agenda should be a wide range of research on several levels. I do not refer to the research that will be done only by professional scholars, though I certainly include that in the list. A full concept of research would include case studies, action research, participant observation, attitudinal research, and personal stories--all of which have been sadly neglected over a period of many decades.

Let us suppose, for a moment, that the General Conference does make the ethnic minority local church the major emphasis of the 1980-1984 quadrennium. And let us further suppose that the emphasis will be funded, in this tight money economy, up to \$10 million. That is still only the smallest of beginnings. In the first place, the situation is so crucial that plans must be projected immediately, no matter what the General Conference does.

Second, it is a task well within our reach.

If imaginative research and planning could happen--even once--in each of the seventy-three annual conferences, it would put us light-years ahead of where we are now. Besides, it would indicate how and where limited funds can best be used. It would also involve many people--of whom the members of the local churches would be foremost--in the planning of their future.

Whatever else this is, it is research in depth. It is, moreover, intentional action research. And since it goes on informally and by scissors-and-paste anyway, I propose that it be at the top of our agenda for the Board of Higher Education and Ministry and other general boards as well.

If ministry is the key word in intentional church development--and I firmly believe it is--we must now look more closely at what it means to develop an ordained ministry that will be in 1979 what W. E. DuBois described it to be in 1903.

Here again there are some things that must be said with candor. The problem is not one of utter desolation. On the positive side, it must be remembered that our present efforts have much to commend them. Inadequate though they are in numbers, most black ministers in the United Methodist Church do their work well, even in the face of very difficult circumstances. What is needed now, however, is a situation that will make it easier for already good pastors to become outstanding; the large middle group, to become better; and the even larger group of noble beginners and strugglers to maintain a vibrant faith in God, in themselves, and in the church that will nurture them, intentionally and regularly.

This task is so enormous that there is not enough money to accomplish it. That there should be money--in massive amounts where possible--is certainly to be desired. But it will probably astound us to know that what we need, even more than money, are intentional plans and a network of relationships and programs that are aimed at clear and reachable goals.

Whatever the details of such a network, let us assume, for a moment, that it is our plan to recruit and train, over the next quadrennium, at least 150 new black ministers. That, after all, is only an average of two for most annual conferences, three for some. What kind of network could we fashion to attain this goal?

In the first place, we have the considerable resources of the Board of Higher Education and Ministry. From this place, the overall goal could be urgently pursued. Records could be assembled on all black seminarians and preministerial students now in college. We would then know what the baseline is. With that information as a guide, we could claim purposefully the talents and resources of the twelve black colleges. Every college chaplain now knows the students who are headed toward ministry and spends considerable time in guidance and nurture. These persons would then become a part of a continuing network.

Since the Council of Bishops has already called upon each bishop to visit the black college supported historically by his annual conference, this visit could be made more intentional and productive. Suppose, for a moment, that when the bishop goes to the college, he has the name and address of every preministerial student presently enrolled. He could meet with these students in particular--as with all others in general. He could interpret ministry to them, and he could follow up each of

them upon his return to the office, especially if the student belongs to his annual conference.

If this seems to be too tightly organized for some tastes, I would suggest that it is certainly preferable to some of the frantic searches, lost opportunities, and broad assumptions of our present individual styles.

To be sure, there is much more to be written in this area than our limited time and space will allow. There are, for example, many lost opportunities to recruit second-career black ministers. Some of these persons, whose gifts and graces compare favorably with many now in service, have not finished their college work. I submit that we should overcome our fear of competence equivalency and, with the most careful of guidance, lead such persons toward the kind of training, formal and otherwise, that will equip them for full-time and fully ordained ministry.

This, in the broadest of outline, is a suggestion of how the black ministry could be recruited and empowered. The exciting thing in such a development is that, once it is started, success builds upon success. By now it is well known that students are some of the best recruiters of students. What thrilling opportunities come before us here? If a mature black student from one of our seminaries could return to his or her college alma mater in a recruiting role, it would be well worth the expenditure of time and money involved.

It is little known in the church that such innovation and encouragement have already come from this Board of Higher Education and Ministry. When, in 1973, the North Central Jurisdiction considered carefully its needs for a strong black ministry, two consultations were held. The first was held in

Cincinnati, Ohio, in April of 1973. Its purpose was to think our way through to a clear agenda, to set goals, and to begin a loose network of relationships.

Out of this consultation came the plans for another, which was held in Indianapolis, Indiana, in February of 1974. Its purpose was to present the ministry, in its best light, to 125 black youth. But our recruiting efforts were so successful that we had a total registration of 278. When we closed the consultation in Indianapolis, we made it clear that it would continue in each of our annual conferences. And so we organized, loosely, as a Continuing Consultation Committee. The North Central Jurisdictional Conference granted \$90,000 to the Continuing Consultation and the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry made and continued grants of \$20,000.

"What is the result of all this?" one might properly ask. Well, at least a dozen young persons are in college preparing for ministry, and as many more in seminary who would not be in either place except for this network. Quietly, modestly, and all too loosely, we have been at work. Given the great needs before us, our efforts seem to be woefully inadequate. But lay persons are being trained, youth are coming together for planning and program, and morale is being strengthened. If this can be done in one jurisdiction, what great things could be brought to pass if all five worked in cooperation, bringing strength to strength?

At least one story of the Holy Spirit's work should be shared. Among the 278 persons who came to the Indianapolis Consultation on the Black Ministry was a forty-year-old counselor who accompanied the youth from Detroit. He was a supervisor at General Motors, earning more than \$20,000 a year. I did not know him then, but there were

others who did and encouraged him to attend.

During one of our plenary sessions, a speaker came from Nashville to talk to us about ministry. Among other things he said, "I have always enjoyed my ministry." This struck our friend, the General Motors supervisor, and he talked with the speaker after the address. Upon his return home, this man determined to enter the ministry. Even though he had only two years of college, he enrolled in one of our seminaries. After extensive conferences with him and officials of a local church, I appointed him to his first parish. In two and a half years of his pastorate, he has transformed this local church. Then, after the most careful consultation, he was approved for ordination, on the basis of competence equivalency, and was ordained at the 1979 session of the East Ohio Annual Conference.

So it was that a consultation that was planned for youth reached at least one adult as well. And the story continues. This is by no means a success story. We have not attained even our minimal goals. But it is an illustration of what can be done. Further, it is a clear testimony to the willingness of people to follow innovative planning, if and when they sense the soundness of it.

If it is clear by now that our agenda should include the fruits of research and the establishment of a meaningful network, at least one other item should be added. One who understands the need to leave program formation to the boards and agencies should certainly not attempt it from the platform. But my call is for a clear and vital relationship between program formation and program execution. One almost hesitates to call it "program." Indeed, if we are sensitive to the need, we know that better terms would be "movement,"

"crusade," "journey." We know, also, that we must be careful to avoid the posturing and sloganeering, which, for all of their scattered benefits of the past, simply cannot carry the weight of the future.

We must now address such thorny topics as open itineracy, pastoral morale, local church self-studies, selective development of churches, the opening of new churches, and the much-more-painful topic of the closing of local churches. Wisdom dictates that the speaker refrain from addressing these topics in order but state them as a background for what will follow.

Given the long history of segregation in all major church bodies, we have inherited a heavy burden of delicate relations that range all the way from splendid Christian fellowship to ill-concealed distrust, if not hostility. No one who knows this history expects these delicate relations to be transformed in one quadrennium.

Nevertheless, I make bold to state, in conclusion, a startling proposal. It is that we, with full knowledge of our sometimes-difficult relations between black and white, set forth on a new journey for the future. For many the journey has already begun. It is a journey that will be characterized by both candor and compassion, by both listening and talking, by both agreeing and by disagreeing, by both the cultivation of dreams and the facing of hard-nosed fact.

This journey began for me a quarter of a century ago and in this place--when, as a member of the staff of a predecessor board, I made friends of other staff members who knew what it meant to transcend the boundaries so easily set for us as blacks and whites in an unredeemed society.

Such a journey of which I speak is

often better not described because its outlines lead so often to misunderstanding. So let me put it rather plainly. It does not help the black minister nor local church to operate behind a shield of protection that knows nothing of standards, of sacrifice, and of excellence. If an annual conference closes a black local church without the most careful of listening to its congregation, it is quickly--and perhaps correctly--called racism. Then I submit that if a local church is kept alive in a situation where most of the signs point to its closing, it is just as racist to keep it alive simply to escape the charge of racism. At any rate, we shall never know which policy to follow unless the first two items of agenda are taken seriously. Or again, if there are a few black pastors that are unappointable, we do the cause no good by avoiding that issue by passing them around to destroy yet another church. That is neither fair nor wise. These negative illustrations are known to us in a few places but are rarely discussed in the open. Let us then conclude on a positive note.

Whatever is done by the General Conference of 1980, every annual conference should have an emphasis on the ethnic minority local church. The items which I have proposed for our agenda of development are, I think, valid across the board, but they are particularly valid for the black ministry since we already have a network of twelve black colleges which--with all colleges--will face the cruel demands of rationale, economics, and valid service to church and society. The General Conference might come up with a better agenda, but such

things are rarely done in a crowd, even if it is such a highly selective and distinguished crowd.

Human beings have always found it hard to combine a dream with hard-nosed planning but that is no reason why we should not try for yet another time. And so we close with a dream.

The dream is one of a General Conference that sets its agenda clearly before the church. And, since there are always variations upon the major theme, we shall expect, even encourage, these. No matter. All over the church, there will be intentional consultations. We will come to know each other in new and different ways. There will be research. We shall dispel myth and base our programs on valid presuppositions. And there will be a network in which many things fit together. Students will be nurtured, bishops will be informed, information will be shared, and followup will be done. As older leadership retires, new leaders will come from unexpected places. And these new leaders will proclaim the gospel without trading upon the heritage of the past or the cadence of preachers who knew their people, their time, and their God.

Well, you ask, when will these things happen? And my answer is this: they are happening now, to some extent, but we have been too modest or too loosely knit to let each other know it. And can it happen in the future? Indeed, it can. If present signs are correct, it must happen. We will set the structure through which it will happen and God will bring it about. For the fullness of time is here and tomorrow will be too late.

NOTES

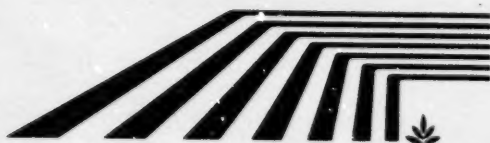
1. From The United Methodist Monitor (March 1979), New World Outlook (December 1976 and January 1977), and The Christian Century (April 18, 1979).
2. The Episcopal Address, 1976.
3. Report of the Board of Higher Education and Ministry, Reprinted in The United Methodist Monitor, March 1979.
4. Newscope, August 24, 1979.
5. Ibid.

Bishop James S. Thomas presides over the East Ohio Annual Conference.

This paper was originally delivered as the Willson lecture at the 1979 annual meeting of the Board of Higher Education and Ministry in Nashville. The Willson lectures are designed to contribute to the spiritual and intellectual enrichment of persons associated with the church's boards and agencies and to present to them and the Nashville community the scholarly contributions of distinguished leaders in higher education and educational philanthropy.

The lectures were established in 1955 under the aegis of the former Methodist Board of Education by Mr. and Mrs. James M. Willson, Sr., of Floydada, Texas. Mr. Willson, long prominent in the affairs of his church and in educational philanthropy, died on June 5, 1972.

In the course of a long life of service to his local church and annual conference, Mr. Willson established Willson lectureships at more than twenty institutions, nearly all related to the United Methodist Church. Funds for the lectureship, which will benefit many generations of students, are held by the Board of Higher Education and Ministry as endowments, with income going to the institutions involved.



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